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AUTHOR	Hadderman, Margaret
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ABSTRACT

This digest offers a snapshot of the standards movement: its origins, the definitions of standards and which ones matter, its successes at the district and state levels, the backlash against the movement, and possible policy directions. While a broad coalition of constituencies has embraced standards-based reform as a means of improving public schools' accountability, preparing a globally competitive work force, and decreasing the achievement gap among various racial ethnic groups, equally vocal groups are arguing that the tough standards movement is flunking too many students and detracting from classroom learning. Critics say the standards movement has been "reduced to a single policy--high stakes testing" linking one set of standardized tests scores to promotion, high-school graduation, and even educator salaries and tenure decisions. Moreover, states pushing for higher standards must provide massive funding for the remedial, tutoring, and professional-development programs needed to enhance students' success. As of early 1999, only 11 states offered such funding. Drawing on pioneering districts' initial successes, educators are advised to make learning (not testing) the goal, provide special assistance for disadvantaged students, set realistic failure rates, invest in wide-ranging reforms, make retention a last resort, capitalize on publicity, and concentrate on urban high schools. (Contains 14 references.) (DFR)

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Standards: The Policy Environment

By Margaret Hadderman

The phrase "higher standards" has become a rallying cry for avid school reformers and politicians alike. A broad coalition of constituencies have embraced standards-based reform as a means of improving public schools' accountability, preparing a globally competitive work force, and decreasing the achievement gap among various racial ethnic groups (Orfield and Wald 2000).

Equally vocal groups are arguing that the tough standards movement is flunking too many students and detracting from classroom learning.

This Digest offers a snapshot of the standards movement: its origins, its successes at the district and state levels, the backlash against the movement, and possible policy directions.

What Are the Origins and Status of National Standards?

Efforts to establish national standards and tests grew out of several key developments, such as adaptation of President Bush's and the nation's governors' six national education goals (1989), establishment of the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (1991), and Congress's enactment of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994) (Wraga 1999). Although the Clinton Administration has been trying to develop "voluntary" national tests since 1997, most experts agree that the national-standards debate is over (Doyle 1999).

Action on standards continues at the state level, where standards are "quietly going national," thanks to interstate comparisons on the Achieve, Inc. website (Doyle). Wraga believes states "have acceded to national policy" by accepting federal funding to align state curriculum frameworks with existing standardized test content or with "state-developed criterion-referenced exams."

Scott Thompson (1999) points out that the movement is not monolithic and that districts are developing their own highly individualized performance standards and allowing students adequate time to master them. Critics like Orfield and Wald say the standards movement has been "reduced to a single policy—high-stakes testing" linking one set of standardized test scores to promotion, high-school graduation, and even educator salaries and tenure decisions.

According to Achieve, Inc. (2000), an advocacy group comprised of state governors and corporate CEOs, 38 states that participated in the October 1999 Education Summit have renewed their commitment to the standards agenda. The group has vowed to host national forums to tackle persistent challenges: "improving educator quality, helping all students reach high standards, and strengthening accountability."

Every state except Iowa has adopted K-12 content standards; 26 are developing or already employing high-school exit exams; and "19 publicly identify failing schools" (Nina and Sol Hurwitz 2000). Four states (California, Florida, Georgia, and Ohio) are launching initiatives to compensate teachers for choosing certain academic specialties or teaching at disadvantaged schools, and 13 states have new programs to reward highly effective schools (Achieve, Inc.).

What Defines Standards and Which Ones Matter?

There is considerable agreement on standards for standards. Proponents say standards "should be grounded in core academic disciplines and should cover what students should know... and be able to do" (Gratz 2000). Standards dictate ends, not means, and should not prescribe teaching methods, classroom strategies, or lesson plans. Standards should be rigorous and world-class, enjoy broad public support, and be aligned with appropriate and valid assessments.

Berger (2000) isolates several types of standards: overarching or district standards; content and student-performance standards; school-delivery standards; and system-delivery standards. Emphasis should be on high expectations for all students; equal learning opportunities; applied understanding, not coverage; and individual students' work, not grades or cross-school and cross-student comparisons (Thompson, Gratz, Berger).

Are Performance Standards Being Successfully Implemented?

States and school districts with the most successful high-stakes testing records have maintained bipartisan political and business support, stimulated systemwide reform, and addressed the achievement of their lowest-performing students (Hurwitzes).

Texas, a turnaround state whose student population is half African-American and Hispanic, is a good example. Minority students' scores on national math and reading assessments outranked those of most other states in 1996 and 1998; scores for all students on the Texas Assessment of Academic skills improved for the fourth straight year. Experts agree that Texas high schools have not improved so drastically and that minority dropout rates are increasing (Orfield and Wald).

During the 1990s, only Colorado and Connecticut made significant progress on consistently administered NAEP math and reading tests (Jerald 2000). The few states making headway on these exams (Connecticut, Texas, North Carolina, and Kentucky) are education policy pace-setters.

Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center in Estes Park, Colorado, exemplifies standards-based learning, according to Director Lois Easton. This alternative school "enrolls high-school students who have not been successful in other academic programs and holds them to the same high achievement expected of all students in the state's model content standards."

Scott Thompson has visited entire districts engaged in collaborative, systemic, standards-based change,

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including those in Aurora, Colorado; New York City's Community School District 2; Edmonds, Washington; Memphis, Tennessee; and districts belonging to the El Paso (Texas) Collaborative for Academic Excellence.

Chicago, the first urban district to end social promotion, has succeeded in raising the bar gradually; the district provides summer remedial programs for students who fail the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. However, curricula and expectations for high-schoolers are below par (Hurwitzes 2000).

New York City has experienced disappointment with student test performance, scoring errors, and glitches in its mandatory summer programs. The state's tough new Regents exams may have to be "scaled down" so that more students can pass them.

Is There a Basis for a Backlash?

Some parents, students, educators, and other stakeholders are alarmed by unintended consequences of imperfectly designed and implemented standards-based programs. Some states "are using tests in ways that directly contradict the recommendations of the National Academy of Sciences, the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, and other experts," who advise that "one-shot assessments" should never determine major decisions about a student's academic future (Orfield and Wald).

Louisiana, the first state to use high-stakes test scores to retain thousands of elementary and middle-school students, is ignoring that advice, and Delaware, Ohio, and South Carolina will soon follow suit (Robelen 2000).

Civil-rights advocates claim that most high-stakes testing policies, particularly those linking single standardized assessment scores to promotion and graduation, discriminate against minority youth, hamstring teachers, reduce complex learning opportunities, and punish victims, not perpetrators, of educational inequities (Orfield and Wald).

In response to increased testing pressures, many educators are "piling on homework, abolishing recess for young children, cheating on tests, flunking more students, teaching to the tests, and seeking to rid themselves of low performers," claims Gratz. Stressed-out students and teachers are an inevitable consequence, unless principals act as buffers and parents become activists (Kohn website).

Parents, students, and teachers in Florida, Louisiana, Ohio, and Texas are fueling a movement to abolish standards-based programs (Gehring 2000). U.S. Secretary of Education William Riley recently advised states to undertake a "midcourse review" of standards progress to address opponents' concerns (Bradley 2000).

What Are Some Possible Directions for Policy and Practice?

In July 2000, at the American Federation of Teachers' biennial conference in Philadelphia, Riley echoed AFT president Sandra Feldman's concerns that policymakers have raised standards too quickly for both students and teachers and that states are "rushing to put assessments into place" (Bradley).

A report from the National Dropout Center recommends that states use their rigorous new standards "to develop interventions that provide teachers with the skills and knowledge required to teach to the higher standards and [provide] students with additional opportunities" to attain them (Duttweiler and McEvoy 1999). The center advocates that interventions "be in place for a sufficient time before accountability measures are enforced" and that schools increase their "holding power" by creating a highly motivational, achievement-oriented climate.

Feldman claims that secondary teachers need considerable assistance in learning how to address struggling students' skill deficits. She proposes that "older students be guaranteed after-school and summer school programs" and a transitional year to learn basic skills (from specially trained teachers) required for graduation (Bradley).

States pushing for higher standards must provide massive funding for the remedial, tutoring, and professional-development programs needed to enhance students' success, says Gratz. As of early 1999, only 11 states offered such funding (Gratz).

More research is needed on the merits of experimental standards-based programs like Eagle Rock's. Lessons might be learned from Iowa and from public and private schools whose students perform well in the absence of state-imposed standards (Thompson).

Drawing on pioneering districts' initial successes, the Hurwitzes advise educators to make learning (not testing) the goal, provide special assistance for disadvantaged students, set realistic failure rates, invest in wide-ranging reforms, make retention a last resort, capitalize on publicity, and concentrate on urban high schools.

Standards have great reform potential if educators "design them appropriately, implement them fairly, provide help rather than punishment, and recognize improvement for students from their various starting-places" (Gratz).

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